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ABSTRACT

A study elaborated a profile of four northeastern Ohio middle-grade teachers who incorporated whole language instruction into their classrooms. The overarching question investigated was how middle grade teachers proceeded to configure whole language instruction in their classrooms. Teachers for the study were selected based on their use of and commitment to whole language. The teachers in the study were two fifth-grade teachers and two sixth-grade teachers. A variety of ethnographic data collection techniques were used: observation of each class for 7 weeks and the conducting of a structured interview and six semi-structured interviews with each teacher. Results showed that teacher beliefs about whole language were similar while interpretations and applications were diverse. In observations, three different interpretations appeared. The first of these, "cooperative learning," describes those teachers for whom group activities form the major component of the whole language approach. In these groups, students prepared and presented research projects, discussed self-selected readings, taught lessons through expert groups, and brainstormed to answer discussion questions. The second interpretation, "strategic teaching and learning," minimizes isolated skill instruction and teaches literacy across the curriculum. It models techniques for helping children to interact with a text, ways of figuring out new words, predicting outcomes, or skimming. The third interpretation, "thematic units," is organized around units on, say, "friendship", "Christmas", or "African-American history"; it requires whole-class or small-group reading of entire books or novels. (TB)

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SINGLE PAPER RESEARCH REPORT

TEACHER INTERPRETATIONS OF WHOLE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN FOUR MIDDLE GRADE CLASSROOMS

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TEACHER INTERPRETATIONS OF WHOLE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN FOUR MIDDLE GRADE CLASSROOMS

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to provide descriptive data revealing how four middle grade teachers interpret whole language instruction in their individual classrooms. Many experts consider a whole language instructional model for the middle grades superior to the predominant "transmission model" (Allington, 1990). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that while whole language is being implemented in some elementary schools, the number of middle schools adopting such an approach is few (Simmons, 1991). Therefore, this study sought to examine how those teachers who overcame the "anvil of tradition" (Simmons, 1991) at this level chose to configure this innovation.

According to McCaslin (1989), "Implementation is the critical future task for whole language" (p. 227). This task is made even more difficult when we recognize that whole language is 1) a difficult-to-define concept and 2) represents not just one innovation, but several including process writing, use of children's literature, and cooperative learning (Heald-Taylor, 1989). Because of these issues, "In practice, teachers will vary in their working definitions, usually placing emphasis on certain dimensions of their concepts of whole language" (Vacca and Rasinski, 1992, p.6). Through examination of teachers' definitions and interpretations of this innovation, the researcher can not only identify which dimensions teachers emphasize in practice, but also gain an understanding of how those dimensions are addressed in the classroom.

This study then provided a profile of four northeastern Ohio middle grade teachers who incorporated whole language instruction into their classrooms. The question which provided the overarching framework for the study was: How do middle grade teachers configure whole language instruction in their classrooms? Four secondary questions were also considered: 1) What were these teachers' definitions of and beliefs about whole language? 2) How did these teachers involve students in literature? 3) How did teachers involve students in process writing? 4) How and to what extent were supportive, cooperative environments created?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology provided the best means for determining the configurations of whole language instruction in these classrooms. According to Merriam (1988) qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with process, i.e., "how" a certain phenomenon occurred rather than "what" and with meaning, i.e. how people interpret their own reality. This study not only examined how teachers configured their use of whole language, but also examined the meanings teachers attached to this process. In addition, ethnographic techniques offered the opportunity to examine the context wherein phenomena occurred, which is particularly important in the study of classroom-based innovations. As Kantor, Kirby and Goetz (1981) state: "Ethnography [is] flexible, discovery oriented, and concerned with the particulars of context...It is therefore appropriate to the study of the multidimensional aspects of language instruction" (p. 305).

The **"ideal selection" model** (Merriam, 1988) was used to identify possible subjects for the study. Reading supervisors in 10 northeastern Ohio school districts were contacted and asked to nominate at least one middle-grade whole language teacher in their district based upon the following criteria: 1) The teacher makes extensive use of children's tradebooks; 2) creates a variety of writing opportunities for children; 3) successfully integrates reading, writing, speaking and listening; and 4) has been using whole language for at least two years. A structured follow-up interview with each subject identified each teacher's extent of use of whole language. The researcher selected four teachers, two fifth grade and two sixth grade, as subjects for the study.

The researcher used a variety of **ethnographic data collection** techniques. She observed instruction in each of the classrooms for a period of seven weeks and recorded those observations in the form of field notes. She conducted one structured interview, the Conceptual Framework of Reading Interview (Gove, 1981), and six semi-structured interview with each teacher. Classroom documents collected included student writing samples and other work. The researcher used triangulation to establish structural corroboration of data.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Results of the study suggest that teacher definitions of and beliefs about whole language were similar, while interpretations of whole language instruction were diverse. All identified whole language as a philosophical approach which involved teaching language literacy from whole to part in meaningful contexts. All mentioned integration of subjects as important and emphasized addressing the needs of the whole child. Three of the four used the metaphor of family to describe their whole language classrooms.

All teachers studied used literature, process writing, and cooperative learning to some extent. All viewed literacy learning as extending beyond the language arts classroom into the content areas. All created classroom environments which promoted risk taking, creativity, and literacy development. All involved students in small and large group reading of novels. None used basal readers or workbooks.

Despite the apparent similarities, these teachers filtered literacy instruction through three very different lenses. The researcher identified **three different interpretations** of whole language. These interpretations included cooperative learning, strategic teaching and learning, and thematic units.

Cooperative Learning

The first teacher studied viewed whole language largely through the lens of **cooperative learning**. She defined whole language as "changeable...it changes as you get better at doing it..It involves integrating across all subjects...it means writing in math class and making language meaningful. It means getting all [the students'] senses involved." Her view of the ideal whole language teacher was that there would be "no separation of subjects, little busy work, much cooperative learning, and many books in the classroom."

The classroom environment was designed to accomodate cooperative learning groups.. Desks were permanently arranged in clusters, and one student in each group acted as the "team captain." Groups were most often heterogeneous and were changed frequently.

Almost all literacy activities occurred within the context of these groups. Specific cooperative learning activities including "think, pair, share" and jigsaw provided

organizational structures for a variety of literacy learning experiences. In these groups students prepared and presented research projects, discussed self-selected readings, taught lessons through expert groups, brainstormed to answer discussion questions, shared journals and other written responses, and identified ideas for book extension activities.

Strategic Teaching and Learning

The second teacher's whole language instruction emphasized **strategic teaching and learning.** She defined whole language as "a philosophical point of view more than a method. It's a child-centered philosophy which focuses upon teaching language and literacy within the context of real-life situations--functional learning that 's connected and meaningful." She identified the ideal whole language teacher as one who minimizes isolated skill instruction and teaches literacy across the curriculum.

The teacher consistently modeled and demonstrated techniques for helping children interact with text whether figuring out new words, predicting outcomes, or skimming and scanning. The teacher repeatedly modeled ways for children to "plow through" text when they didn't know all the words; she modeled techniques such as DRTA, skimming and scanning, and highlighting text. Children internalized these strategies and taught each other and younger children to use them in cooperative groups. Writing was used strategically as a means to solve class problems, explore student difficulties with mathematics, and record the growth of classroom flora and fauna.

Thematic Units

The third and fourth teachers interpreted whole language largely in terms of **thematic units** which involved integration of the language arts in one case and extensive incorporation of content area material in the other. Teacher #3's units were primarily themed literature units. Teacher #4 used interdisciplinary themes which most often cut across content areas.

Teacher #3 defined whole language as "Using whole pieces of literature for instruction and teaching top-down, not bottom up. It's the best way for children to learn." She identified the ideal whole language teacher as one who is "flexible, child-centered, a decision-maker, and a reader." In her classroom 3-4 week units were geared primarily toward topics such as Friendship, Christmas, or African American History. These units typically involved whole class reading of one or two books and small group reading of novels. Teacher # 3 explained that she tried to select units which related to science and/or social studies and had relevance for her students' lives. For this reason she often selected books with black characters. She found that units helped her students "connect things and generalize what they learn in school to their lives."

Reading, writing, and dramatic activities related to the theme under study. For example, during the African American History unit students read Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry. The teacher read To Be A Slave aloud to the students. Then students read other related titles in small groups. They read the novels with partners andresponded to them through journals and dramatization. Group activities were, to some extent, dependent upon the needs of the children. For example, some group extension activities were specifically assigned to particular groups based upon their instructional needs. Children who lacked oral fluency participated in Reader's Theater while others lacking in comprehension abilities participated in dramatizations.

As a culminating activity for this unit students were involved in a mock school board meeting. The school board was required to determine how best to integrate an imaginary

school district. The teacher assigned students to particular neighborhoods and required that they role play the part of particular residents. Students wrote and delivered three minute speeches expressing their character's viewpoints about how integration might best be achieved. Finally, the school board members voted on how best to achieve this goal.

Teacher #4 defined whole language as "teaching children; taking the whole child and letting that child work on whole projects, not bits and pieces." She viewed the ideal whole language teacher as "curious and aware of children's emotional levels..also someone who can organize without somewhat telling them what they should put in their units."

Thematic units were lengthy (10 weeks), broad, cross-curricular, and complex. They included a unit on picture books designed to teach literary elements, a folk and fairy tale unit, a unit on Native Americans, and a unit on the Middle Ages.

Students studied five novels, viewed two films, and completed extensive research projects and writing activities pertaining to the Middle Ages unit. Some novels such as Robin Hood were read by the entire group. Students responded to their readings through daily journal entries. In these entries students wrote summaries of their reading; they also created discussion questions based upon the book. These questions were all intended to tap higher level thinking skills. They recorded unknown words in their journals; these became spelling words for the week. Students compared the Disney video of Robin Hood to the book they read.

Other titles including The Whipping Boy and The Door in the Wall were read in small groups. Students completed in-depth research projects on various aspects of life in the Middle Ages. In addition, children created their own coats of arms based upon the characteristics of their families as they saw them.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this study suggest that individual middle grade whole language teachers may hold similar beliefs about whole language and use relatively similar instructional practices. All taught reading and writing through children's literature. All involved children in group activities and/or cooperative learning groups. All of the teachers were concerned about student literacy development in every subject area. This concern for content area literacy learning was reflected in all of the classrooms but to varying degrees.

These results clearly suggest that teachers establish frameworks around which they organize content and develop particular literacy learning experiences for students. These frameworks provide a structure for literacy instruction and have a significant impact upon teacher planning. Possible explanations for these different configurations include individual teacher strengths, individual interpretations of what whole language is, and different degrees of experience in terms of use of this innovation.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has important implications for future research. First, it suggests that whole language teachers create frameworks and that these frameworks will differ between and among teachers. Further studies might identify other configurations in addition to those

identified in this study. It would be interesting to learn too whether or not those configurations are the same in the primary grades as in the middle grades.

This innovation clearly meant different things, at least in practice, to each of the four teachers described in this research. This study did not attempt to discover the factors that shaped each teachers' views of whole language or that influenced their decisions about how it should be configured in the classroom. Further research may provide us with additional insights into why these teachers and other whole language teachers configure their classrooms as they do.

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